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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of the attitude of the reader toward women's changing role on the reader's response to literature that illuminates women's role. Twelve skilled readers, six male and six female high school seniors with I.Q.'s of 120 or above, were selected because their semantic differentials indicated that half favored women's changing role and the other half did not. They read and responded to four short stories: two, termed "sensitive," illuminated women's role and two, termed "neutral," had no bearing on that subject. Results were derived from quantitative data, based on four objective measures of response, and from qualitative findings from case studies. Among the findings were that readers who favored women's changing role made a significantly higher proportion of affective responses to "sensitive" stories than did their peers and that the two groups did not differ in either affective or cognitive classes of free response to "neutral" stories. The case studies complemented the quantitative data, provided further insights into individuals' response processes, and revealed several characteristic approaches to interpretation of literature.

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The Relationship between Attitude of the Reader
towards Women's Changing Role and Response
to Literature which Illuminates Women's Role

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine how an attitude of a reader might affect response to literature, and the specific question for which answers were sought was: How does the attitude of the reader towards women's changing role affect response to literature which illuminates women's role? Twelve skilled readers, six male and six female high school seniors with I.Q.'s of 120 or above, were selected because their semantic differentials indicated that half favored women's changing role and the other half did not. They read and responded to four short stories: two, termed "sensitive," illuminated women's role, and two, termed "neutral," had no bearing on that subject. Results were derived from both quantitative data, based on four objective measures of response, and qualitative findings from case studies of these students. Among the findings were the following: (1) readers who favored women's changing role made a significantly larger mean proportion of effective responses to "sensitive" stories than their non-favoring peers.(2)In neither affective nor cognitive classes of free response to "neutral" stories were there significant differences between the two groups of readers.(3)The case studies complemented the quantitative data, provided further insights to individuals' response processes, and revealed several characteristic approaches to interpretation of literature.

English teachers often feel a sense of frustration when they try to understand students' response to literature. The teacher knows that the response depends, to some degree, upon the student's own experience which he/she brings to any literary work; but the instructor is far less certain about the nature of that relationship. Within the last several years our knowledge about literature education and the characteristic responses of many ages and types of students has been vastly increased, as a result of the massive research conducted in ten countries under the direction of Purves (1973), but we still know very little about why a reader responds in a certain way to a given text. The purpose of this study was to examine this relationship between reader and literature, and to determine how an attitude of the reader might affect his/her response. The specific question for which answers were sought was: How does the attitude of the reader towards women's changing role affect response to literature which illuminates women's role?

Procedure

To assure that basic reading ability would not be a factor in the results, it was decided that students selected for this investigation would have been required to have scored in the upper quartile of a standardized reading test and to have an I.Q. of 120 or higher. Following a pilot study, a semantic differential designed to evaluate attitude towards women's changing role was administered to fifty seniors, in a New York State senior high school, whose scores were in the upper quartile of a Nelson-Denny Reading Test. The participants, whose measured I.Q.'s were 120 or higher, comprised three males and three females who favored women's changing role; and three males and three females who did not favor that change. The case study technique was used to provide a close-up view of the reader and his/her response, and data were collected from interviews with students, teachers and counselors. More infor-

mation came from cumulative folders, and tests and questionnaires that the students completed.

Individually and privately, students next read four short stories. Two of these were termed "sensitive" because they illuminate women's role: "Big Blonde" by Dorothy Parker, and "Notes for a Case History" by Doris Lessing. The other two were classified as "neutral" since they have no bearing whatever on women's role: "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and "The Wall" by Jean-Paul Sartre. Following the reading, each student completed four measures; the first was a measure of free response, and the other three were measures of directed response: (1) five minutes of oral, tape-recorded, free response; (2) twenty multiple-choice questions to test readers' "plain sense" of the story; (3) a group of statements designed to evaluate affective response to each story; (4) Purves' Response Preference Measure.

Results

The taped, oral free responses were transcribed and categorized according to Squire's (1956) classifications: Literary Judgment; Interpretational; Narrational; Associational; Self-Involvement; Prescriptive Judgment; Miscellaneous. The results indicated that (1) for all twelve readers, the two types of stories elicited significantly (at .05 and .01) different mean proportions of response in five out of seven categories; (2) readers who favored women's changing role made a significantly larger mean proportion of affective (associational, self-involvement, and prescriptive judgment) responses, and a significantly smaller mean proportion of cognitive (interpretational, narrational, and literary judgment) responses to "sensitive" stories than their non-favoring peers; (3) in neither affective nor cognitive classes of free response to "neutral" stories were there significant differences between readers with different attitudes towards women's changing role. Of the three measures of directed response, only the one assessing affective reactions

suggested an association between attitude and response. Apparently, with skilled readers, attitudes do not affect comprehension, but they do appear to be associated with free response. These students, like those of similar age and education in Purves' study (1973), showed a distinct preference for interpretation as their mode of response.

Further information was derived from case studies, two of which are presented here, in summary. The two subjects, Lucy and Robert, represent strongly contrasting attitudes towards women's changing role, and analysis of their modes of response to the stories was instructive.

Case Study Number One: Lucy

Age: 18
 Scholastic average: 91.16
 Class rank: 13/229
 Lorge Thorndike Form A (1969): I.Q. 137
 Nelson- Denny Reading Test (Forms C and D):
 Vocabulary and Comprehension: 99th %ile
 Grade equivalent: 15.0+

Lucy is a bright, imaginative eighteen-year old who has few, if any, role models in her environment. Even in her reading, when asked to name five fictional characters she most admired, she selected only male figures. But, despite this lack, Lucy pursues her own goals and interests, using a large portion of her spare time for reading and writing. As a writer, she creates male characters because she recognizes that, until recently anyway, the prevailing view of women is that "they seldom do anything worth writing about." Her interest in the composing process is seen in her characteristic free responses to the four short stories she read for this study. Generally, she moves between literary judgments and interpretations, using the former to discover motivations and relationships between incident and character. There was a difference, however, between her responses to the "sensitive" and "neutral" stories. Lucy entered the "sensitive" stories, which elicited her only self-involvement and prescriptive judgment responses, in a way that she did not the others. As she became emotionally involved with the characters in the "sensitive" stories, she

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did not maintain the aesthetic distance which was apparent in her discussions of the "neutral" stories, and the quality of her interpretations diminished somewhat. It seems clear that because Lucy feels strongly about women's changing role and is strongly self-directed, she was repulsed by the female characters in the "sensitive" stories; this emotion was evidenced in the types of responses she made to them.

Case Study Number Two: Robert

Age: 18
Scholastic Average: 87.3
Class rank: 36/229
Large Thorndike Form A (1969): I.Q. 122
Nelson-Denny Reading Test (Forms C and D):
Vocabulary and Comprehension: 86th %ile
Grade Equivalent: 14.5

Robert is an intelligent, ambitious young man who works hard to achieve so that he may become a dentist, "have a family, and a nice home." He enjoys music and likes science fiction, although over the past year he has read little except school-assigned books. He is status conscious and describes himself as a sexist, an assertion borne out by his semantic differential. His characteristic mode of response to the four short stories read for this study is interpretation, often preceded by narrational reactions which help him work his way through various aspects of a story before reconstructing them within an acceptable framework. Somewhat guarded and cautious, Robert reveals his customary distance in his free response to these stories, for he made only a single statement classified as "self-involvement," and none in the associational, prescriptive judgment, or miscellaneous categories. Robert's attitude of not favoring women's changing role could be observed in his misreading of one of the "sensitive" stories, "Notes for a Case History," in which he reversed the characteristics of the two leading male characters in order to avoid recognizing ambivalent traits in the central female figure who tries unsuccessfully to break away from the sex-stereotyped role her mother has set for her. This misreading is striking in view of

Robert's keen observations concerning the doctor's role in "The Wall," a subtlety which was either missed entirely or barely alluded to by other readers. Robert's independence and aloofness set him apart from his peers, but he appears to be comfortable with the knowledge that he would not be termed a "typical" teenager, which is, no doubt, an indication of a more than average degree of maturity. In at least one other way, however, he does resemble other young men growing up in a technological society and age, for Robert finds that books are less interesting to him than the sophisticated calculator he carries in his pocket much of the time.

Information from the case studies was combined with analyses of individuals' free responses in order to provide as broad a base as possible for the findings of this study, and four tendencies were observed: (1) The Reader as Selector: readers reveal characteristic approaches to interpretations which depend on their interests and values. (2) The Unhappy Childhood Syndrome: readers blame a character's plight on a lack of parental love, without textual support for such a view. (3) The Bias that Blinds: readers, after classifying or stereotyping characters, have a difficult time allowing for conflicting qualities with which an author may invest a figure. (4) Happiness Binding (Squire, 1956): readers may interpret events so that the story will end "happily," even though there is little or no evidence to that effect.

The findings suggest the following conclusions:

1. An attitude of intelligent, skilled readers is associated with his/her response in at least two ways: first, readers whose attitude seems to coincide with that of an author's tend to make a larger mean proportion of affective responses to that work than do readers whose attitude is different from the author's; second, readers whose attitude differs from that of an author's tend to make a larger mean proportion of interpretational, or cognitive, responses to that work than do readers whose attitude seems to coincide with the author's.

2. In measures of directed response, there is only a slight indication that there exists an association between an attitude of the reader and response.
3. Given the limitation of the tests used, it appears that the attitude of able readers is not a factor in their comprehension of a story.
4. Interpretation is the preferred mode of response of these skilled readers.
5. Free response provides a more effective means for discriminating among intelligent, skilled readers than directed response.
6. Case studies shed further light on the free response of able readers.
7. While some of Squire's categories (1956) proved to be satisfactory for classifying readers' free response, others did not provide sufficiently fine discriminations.
8. Combining quantitative data with qualitative analysis to investigate response offers a number of advantages that each method, by itself, lacks.

While the attitude towards women's changing role was seen as a token of other possible attitudes, this study did seek information about how readers regarded female characters in fiction. To the question asking which female character they had read about in English classes they would most like to resemble (Beaven, 1972), only one of these six bright young women gave a positive answer; four others left it blank and one wrote, "None--women are treated poorly in literature."

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